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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore aspects of intercultural communication present when Iranians attempted to communicate publicly in the United States. Thirty-six American students with little previous knowledge of Iran were interviewed following their attendance at a public lecture/demonstration sponsored by Iranian students in Texas. The Americans' responses to and impressions of Iranian students fell into eight areas that caused or indicated confusion, misunderstanding, or alienation. Some of these areas of conflict for the Americans were the Iranians' intense intergroup conflict, their unexpected public forum tactics, their high emotionalism, their lack of facts and substantiation, their personal attacks or personalization of issues, their wild accusations of conspiracies and plots, and their unusual or inadequate speakers. The Iranian system of organizing and regulating political relationships--based on a web system that relies on networks of informal power relationships as the basis of authority, power, and politics--can explain how even though the Iranians were eager to gain American support, their attempts to communicate and persuade usually resulted in limited success. (MKM)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF IRANIAN STUDENTS IN PUBLIC FORUMS IN THE U.S.

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Iranian students in the United States are a special group of foreign students. In the mid 70's, 10% of all Iranian students in higher education were in American universities.[1] They were the largest foreign student group in the U.S., roughly 12% of the total (18, p. 15). Iranian students, more than any other group of foreign students, participated in public forums and demonstrations, which have become increasingly more frequent, disruptive and violent in their attempt to influence American public opinion. Foreign student advisors identified Iranians because of their political activities as one of two foreign student groups that have serious difficulties communicating with Americans.[2]

The underlying dynamics of Iranian-American communication in public forums are neither easily explicated nor simple. They have not, however, originated recently. For example, in 1976 Iranian political behavior led to numerous arrests in Houston and other Texas cities, calls to regulate and limit public political activity by foreign students (26), and demands for deportation of protestors (21).

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[1]The figures on Iranian students abroad are estimates. Accurate figures are available only for students with student passports (14, p. 427). Figures do not include those students studying abroad with ordinary passports, a number generally thought to be considerable by the Consulate-General in Houston, Texas. In addition, reported figures are often uncertain. Moftakar reports a discrepancy of 85,000 students in 1972-1973 in the statistics of the Ministry of Education in Iran and the Iran Almanac which reports statistics from the Ministry of Education (20, p. 12).

[2]Foreign student advisors interviewed at National Association of Foreign Student Advisors Workshop, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and at the University of Texas at Austin, April 1976.

Given this history of intercultural difficulties and conflict, this paper explores the problems identified by Americans in their communications with Iranian students in public forums in the U.S. and provides an explanation for Iranian behavior by explicating the underlying Iranian structure of organization operating in public forums in the U.S. This information is valuable in clarifying some of the causes of mutual misunderstanding in Iranian-American communication.

Porter (23), Saral (24), and Smith (25) have identified the need for specific information on individual cultures and on interaction for understanding intercultural communication. A review of Iranian cultural studies provides specific information on Iranian culture (2,3,4,5,6,11,15,16), but little information directly on Iranian-American interaction. This study assumed that some of the conflict and alienation in Iranian-American interaction was the result of misunderstanding, ignorance, or insensitivity to cultural factors. Furthermore, a description, analysis and interpretation of intercultural interaction provide practical information for training and teaching, as well as a solid basis for research and theory development (see 9,12,28).

Foreign student research on Iranians in the U.S., conducted since 1969, yields 4 studies (8,10,13,20) reporting on Iranian attitudes, adjustment and problems, but no information on interaction. These studies employed questionnaires, interviews, and checklists to collect data. In addition to recognizing the limitations on reliability and validity inherent in these methods of data collection (1,22), there are particular problems when used with foreign students. Spaulding and Flack state that in foreign student research opinion and analysis of reported data are often unreliable and misleading (27). In

the case of Iranians, varying degrees of English ability and their knowledge of American culture can interfere with data collection. Iranian codes of politeness and hospitality (11, p. 128), status relationships (2,3), as well as political considerations, including the fear of the Iranian secret police, affect compliance and self-disclosure. Furthermore, an individual may not want to or be able to verbalize his cultural values and norms. Those verbalizations that were made would be subjective views of behavior and dependent on situational factors apart from those operating when those behaviors occurred. Finally, the cooperative attitude of many Americans towards research cannot be assumed with Iranian students. The lack of prior history with social science research may interfere with the data collection and results. Consequently, data collection and verification must be approached cautiously with Iranians to forestall unreliable and misleading results.

The observation of behavior as it occurs compared with reported data would allow verification of data (19,30). However, no studies of foreign students in the U.S. have employed direct observation of behavior as a principal means of data collection (27, pp. 7-10). Hashemi used observations to verify data collected through interviews on adjustment to U.S. culture, but presents this information only incidentally (10). Weakland stresses that communication research should include observation. He states the "study of communication involved almost everything except observing, recording, examining and describing real communication and interaction" (29, p. 1).

Method

The lack of observational and other information on Iranian-American interaction suggested the employment of a participant observation methodology

in this investigation. In Participant Observation, the researcher enters the research setting with general questions that do not impose preconditions on the data collection (7,19). Description and hypotheses follow the researcher's contact with the phenomena under study. Data were systematically collected by participant observation in nine naturally occurring public forums in Texas, from February 1976 to June 1977 (see Appendix A). In every situation the stated objectives of the Iranian leaders were to inform the American audience of the situation in Iran and persuade them to their views. Since the audiences were made up of both Americans interested in Iran and Iranians of different political orientations, the investigator could explore the interpersonal and intergroup behavior of Iranians with the different responses of Americans and Iranians to those behaviors. Over 50 informant and respondent interviews were conducted on these forums, as well as document collection and analysis, which included over 160 newspaper items.

Several procedures were employed to increase the reliability of the data and decrease observer bias. A two-part field report, focusing on objective description of events separate from subjective reaction was written immediately following observations. A de-briefing procedure was conducted on the following day to increase recall of events and clarify subjective versus more objective reactions.[3] Tape recordings, which were subsequently transcribed, were used in interviews with interviewee permission. Information from a respondent was extensively cross-checked with other respondents and informants to form a high degree of consensus on accounts of events. Finally, after the

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[3]Special thanks to Wayne P. Gosnell for his indispensible participation in the de-briefing.

initial observation and interviewing, a seven-dimensional framework, adapted from Johnson (17), was employed to facilitate observation and interviewing. The dimensions included setting, agenda, roles, norms, context, goals, and consequences.

After one year of data collection and analysis, a field experiment was conducted to counteract the effects of Americans with some previous knowledge of Iran who attended the public forums. Thirty-six American students, uninformed about Iran, in two introductory speech classes, were interviewed following their attendance at a public lecture/demonstration. On the day following the lecture the students were asked to describe their reaction to the situation in writing. They were then formed into small groups and systematically interviewed and audio-recorded.

Results

The results of this investigation can be summarized into four areas:

1. A description of Iranian student behavior in public forums in Texas.
2. A description of the American response to Iranian attempts at persuasion or influence.
3. The identification and description of components of a model, suggested by Bill (4,5) of Iranian political behavior in Iran appropriate for conceptualizing and interpreting Iranian student behavior in the U.S.
4. The identification and description of three critical features, appeals to shiftirg power, middlemen, and external constraints, of the above model that act as stabilizers in Iran, but contribute to intercultural communication problems because of their absence or re-definition in the American context.

This presentation will focus on the American response to Iranian student attempts at persuasion based on observed and reported data. Then, selected components of the web system in Iran, abstracted from the literature on Iranian culture, informant and respondent reports, and observed Iranian behavior

in Texas will be discussed. This approach, while reporting only part of the results, will permit elucidation of the major intercultural conflicts resulting from the interface of Iranian and American cultures as characterized by the description of American responses.[4]

Description of the American Perspective

American responses to, and impressions of, Iranian students falls into 8 areas or dimensions that can be considered as causing or indicating confusion, misunderstanding or alienation to some degree, in all the situations investigated.

1. Intense Intergroup Conflict. Few Americans perceived any basic ideological difference between rival Iranian student organizations despite persistent claims by the Iranians that each group was anti-Shah and the others, pro-Shah. Americans were perplexed at the intense rivalry, enmity and type of confrontation of the groups. They characterized the conflicts as "adolescent," "insignificant," "petty," and "self-defeating."[5]

2. Unexpected Public Forums and Tactics. In every situation, except one panel discussion, Americans felt their expectations of the situation were violated and the Iranians re-defined the original intention of the event, i.e., lectures became the oral public reading of leaflets. Tactics were confusing when pickets protesting to discourage participation in public forums, left picket lines at the commencement of the programs, and paid entrance fees to participate as part of the audience. Furthermore, on one occasion the picketing group presented their own speaker as part of the program.

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[4] A paper is being prepared to (1) describe and analyze the three critical stabilizing features in Iranian-American interaction, and (2) compare the Iranian-American data to data collected on Iranian-German interaction in Munich, Germany.

[5] All quotes in this section are by Americans at the forums at the University of Texas at Austin, in Austin, unless otherwise specified.

3. High Emotionalism. Americans reported that situations never justified the level of emotions displayed and considered the Iranians "strident," "excitable," and at times "hysterical." They viewed Iranian behavior as inappropriate and exhibiting a lack of control which interfered with rational consideration of the issues. After a few interpersonal encounters focusing on politics, many Americans were often reluctant to engage Iranians in further political discussions.

4. Lack of Facts and Substantiation. Americans were consistently irritated and alienated by the Iranians' tendency to rely on unsubstantiated arguments and lack of evidence. On one occasion, in response to American demands for facts and substantiation, an Iranian claimed legitimacy for his position on information contained in several issues of Time magazine he waved in his hand. On another occasion, a vice-consul of Iran, in response to persistent requests for written or published documentation of the number of Iranian students in the U.S., wrote an estimate on a piece of paper and handed it to the investigator.

5. Personalism or the Personalization of Issues. Americans said arguments centered on attacking and discrediting personalities rather than on issues. After one panel discussion some Americans regretted that "a serious political issue was transformed into a personality issue,"[6] with each side accusing the other of being "liars," "dogs of the Facist Shah," or "perverts or frogs."[7]

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Quotes are from Iranian participants at Panel Discussion on "Repression in Iran," Austin, Texas, February 3, 1976.

6. Unusual Speakers. Often Americans thought Iranian speakers failed to meet minimum standards of public speaking even when there was adequate time for preparation. The reactions to the speakers depended upon situational context and ranged from astonishment to sympathy. Sometimes an Iranian struggling with English was received sympathetically, but often quite negatively. On one occasion Americans were amazed at "a ridiculous choice for a speaker," who was barely functional in English, heavily accented and "illogical," "irrational," and "insane."

7. Wild Accusations of Conspiracies and Plots. Americans found the Iranians' frequent accusations of bias, spying, plots, and conspiracies difficult to respond to or accept. American professors attempting to negotiate conflicts between rival groups, panel moderators, police, student reporters, in fact, anyone that they came in contact with, were accused by each rival group of being biased against them and for the other group. These accusations were often described as "paranoid" by Americans. For example, one student group accused the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at The University of Texas of being a front organization for conspiratorial university superiors out to discredit their organization, Daily Texan[8] editors and reporters of being FBI agents, and the Houston police of being puppets of the Shah. In fact, a spokesman for one organization claimed the arrest of 91 demonstrators by the Houston police was "the best proof of the brutality of the Shah."[9]

8. Pervasive Tension. The atmosphere at the public forums was usually described as being highly charged and emotional. Americans claimed Iranians

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[8]The Daily Texan is the student newspaper at The University of Texas at Austin.

[9]"Secret Police Infiltrate U.S., Iranian Claims," Austin American-Statesman, November 17, 1976.

heightened anxiety by employing tactics such as picketing, intimidating non-verbal behavior, wearing masks, shouting, and making overt threats. For example, once when the Daily Texan editor refused to publish a retraction of a news article reporting the arrests of two Iranians at a campus demonstration, 50 members of the organization complaining of his biased coverage invaded his office and forced him to leave. In addition, Iranians would often surround an individual, in groups of 4 to 8, and try to "persuade" him. Americans considered this behavior attempts to pressure or intimidate the individual and not persuasion.

In every public forum these 8 dimensions were evident in varying intensities, depending upon the specific situational characteristics. These responses by Americans can best be interpreted and understood by discussing the underlying patterns of organizations formed from comparing the observations, and interviews with the cultural literature on Iran. The work of James Bill on Iranian political behavior in Iran is of particular importance.

Web Patterns of Organization

The Iranian system of organizing and regulating political relationships is based on the lack of formal institutions as known in the U.S. (6). This absence of formal institutions is simultaneously the result of and a contribution to the system of authority and politics in Iran. According to James Bill, this system, historically called the web system because of its reliance on networks of informal power relationships, possesses "remarkable resiliency and resistence to transformation" and remains today the basis for authority, power and politics in Iran (5, p. 15).

Traditionally, the Shah, or leader, rests at the heart of a series of hierarchically arranged concentric circles of individuals (5, p. 15). The

system's maintenance occurs through checks and balance that produce a constant state of fluctuating tension. Specifically, the informal reciprocal power exchange relationships are characterized by positions which have their own direct and informal access to the Shah, functions that overlap with other positions, and the means to check other positions even when relatively weak.

The rivalry and conflict due to overlapping and competing functions infuse each position with a fluid and dynamic quality. The Shah presides over this system in a manner that simultaneously encourages and controls the conflicts and tensions. This maintenance of conflicts prevents concentrations of power from threatening the system, and consequently, the Shah.

Furthermore, this developed rivalry and tension in the informal networks create personal antagonisms, group conflicts, secrecy and pervasive insecurity which serve to distribute and fracture concentrations of threatening power. At any single power point, there exists tensions and circumstances that at once fractionalize and unify the whole. What is characteristic is at each power point has been described as "a fissured unity" or a "cohesive disunity" that is pervasive and persistent in the network (5, p. 32).

Several pervasive and inter-dependent characteristics of the web system were found in operation and critical to understanding the dynamics of Iranian social organization and behavior in the U.S. They are:

1. Informality
2. Personalism and central authority
3. Conflict and tension
4. Insecurity

This paper will discuss briefly two: informality, and personalism and central authority and contrast them to the responses of Americans.

1. Informality. Power and influence are conducted informally through personal networks which in turn are encompassed within a network of informal groups or cliques. Formal organizations and associations of any kind, as known in the U.S., are rare, and even when they do exist they are characterized by fissures, arguments, inactivity, personalism, and in general, by organized chaos (5, p. 45).

Rather than formal commitments, groups or clusters of individuals are formed on a highly personal base around each power point, formal office or title (5, p. 45). Individuals maintain and increase influence through interpersonal connections to special individuals or groups. These pervasive personal inter-connections between groups form networks of personalistic, informal, and fragmented "miniature systems of power . . . which compete, ally, gather strength and, very soon overextended, fragment again" (cited in 5, p. 62).

The dynamic, informal nature of groups was evident by the forming, fracturing and reforming nature of the Iranian student organizations on campus. Groups splintered and formed new groups, and appeared to have fluid memberships difficult even for the group leaders to specify. Members often belonged to more than one group and in one case, one individual was secretary of two organizations.

2. Personalism and Central Authority. The web system describes authority based on individual responsibility for action. The highest authority is an "idealized but personalized representation of the perfect political symbols of morality and wisdom" (16, p. 26). Action is not by that authority, but by others who imitate and act "as the direct result of the personal and moral qualities" of the authority (16, p. 26). The leader, and those lower

echelon leaders interpreting the leaders' intentions, are strong authoritarians, who are at once capable and prepared to force their will upon others. That enforcement of will is essential for the accomplishment of any task (16, p. 21). Successful action, then, is dependent upon such intangibles as individual strength of will, personality and morality, enacted within interpersonal relationships within the informal network.

The focus of power in individuals in informal networks and not institutions is a key to the American perceptions of Iranian behavior. First, the American view that arguments centered on attacking and discrediting personalities is accurate as Iranians regard personal considerations more important than programs and issues. Bill says political criticism is personal and basically non-ideological (6, p. 57). Complaints and criticisms are "automatically directed against personalities" even when the original incident may have involved a general issue or idea (4, p. 140). Jacobs says "individuals are expected to avoid attacking programs directly and rather build up their case in personal terms (16, p. 30).

Second, since Iranians are directed towards personalities and not issues, substantiation or arguments take different forms. Haas suggests a basic difference exists in how a westerner and easterner approach reality and consequently, facts. After describing patterns of the Persian (Oriental) mind, he says:

> All this is in strict opposition to the Western mind, whose fundamental attitude has always been directed to objective reality, that is, to a conception of reality characterized by the greatest possible elimination of the subjective factors. Facts are sacred to the Westerner; they are less so to the Oriental, who has always been more interested in the psychological and human aspects of phenomena (11, p. 127).

The pattern of interaction between Iranians and Americans is never more contrary than on the use of evidence and facts in persuasion. The Iranians observed built-up arguments by discrediting opponents while attempting to enhance the moral righteousness of their own speakers or positions. American requests for facts led to the Iranians intensifying emotional appeals and increasing personal attacks, and not supplying the requested factual information. Thus, a spiral of increasing misunderstanding produced frustration for both parties.

Third, the Iranian pattern of leadership that depends on personal intangible characteristics was responsible for the selection of speakers that Americans thought failed to meet their minimum expectations of a public speaker. On one occasion the speaker viewed by Americans as a "ridiculous choice," and "illogical," "irrational," and "insane," was chosen because of his intense religious commitment and opposition to the Shah and not for his command of English or speaking skills which was admittedly not the best available.[10] Moral purity and commitment to ideals took precedence over speaking skills.

Finally, the contrast between the informal web network and the more formal forums in Texas contributed to performance difficulties for Iranians in the U.S. The external government constraints on political activity in Iran, i.e., limits on political parties and the prohibition against public criticism of the Shah, contributed to a lack of experience in formal public forums. Often Iranians had never heard public criticism of the Shah before attending a public forum in the U.S. Furthermore, some of the Iranian leaders were unable to discriminate between different forms of public forums, as well as

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[10]Interview with the Secretary of the Iranian Students Association, March 1976.

the basic rules, which was manifest in pickets attending the meetings they protested or speakers handing out and then reading leaflets to the audience. They admittedly were unsure of their own behavior in these formal situations, and consequently avoided American requests for debates and programs to clarify the issues. If an American wanted information on the conditions in Iran, Iranians suggested that they talk to a particular "knowledgeable" Iranian student.

Conclusion

This paper presented descriptive data on American responses to Iranian behavior, descriptions of two selected components: informality and personalism, and a connection between the responses of Americans, and the underlying Iranian structure, in order to clarify some causes of misunderstanding, alienation and confusion experienced by both Iranians and Americans in Iranian public forums in the U.S.

The behavior patterns described are important tools in analyzing and interpreting Iranian public political behavior in the U.S. Patterns of informality, personalism, conflict and tension, and insecurity were found to be the pervasive underpinnings of Iranian social organization and behavior. What appears as chaos and confusion becomes organized and understandable when viewed through the complex, interdependent web structure.

In every situation Americans were dissatisfied with the behavior of Iranian students. The unmet expectations of Iranians and American perceptions of "irrational" behavior confused and alienated the Iranians. Consequently, behind the Iranian presentation in American public forums the web system strongly influenced the character of events. Failure of the participants to acknowledge,

understand, and respond to these different systems intensified the frustration in the encounter and resulted in unsatisfactory and ineffective intercultural communication.

Even though the Iranians were eager to gain American support, their attempts to communicate and persuade usually resulted in limited success. Americans were generally not persuaded as the Iranians hoped and, in fact, were often hostile and unenthusiastic about future interactions. Even when Americans felt sympathetic to the Iranian cause, they failed to understand, or act, in the manner or with the intensity the Iranians wanted. This stimulated the Iranians to intensify their appeals, thereby reducing their effectiveness still further. Consequently, the most favorable outcome appeared to be some sympathy, but with little support. Most common was a loss of respect and credibility, resulting in outcomes exactly opposite to Iranian intentions, that is, a loss of support for the Iranian group or position, and a sense the Shah may be justified if faced with similar "irrational" opposition.

The information obtained in this investigation is valuable to those who work with or come in contact with Iranians. More importantly, this information will be helpful to Iranian students who wish to express themselves to Americans in America. Perhaps identifying and understanding the sources of misunderstandings can lead to more effective and more satisfying communication for both parties.

APPENDIX A

Public Forums

1. Panel discussion on "Repression in Iran." Sponsored by the Committee on Intellectual and Artistic Freedom in Iran (CAIFI), The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, February 5, 1976.
2. Debate between William Colby, former CIA Director and Jacques Chonchol, former Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Chile, "Conflict, Order and Peace" Conference. Sponsored by LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, November 10, 1976.
3. Iranian demonstration against the Shah. Houston, Texas, November 10-19, 1976.
4. Panel discussion on "Political Repression in Iran." Sponsored by CAIFI, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, November 17, 1976.
5. Public lecture on "Iran's Economy" by Vahid Nowshirvani, Yale University. Sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, March 10, 1977.
6. Public lecture on "Politics and Social Structure in Iran" by Ervand Abrahamian, CUNY. Sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, March 24, 1977.
7. Public discussion and film on "People's Struggle in Oman." Sponsored by the Iranian Students Association and the Organization of Arab Students, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, April 1, 1977.

8. Public lecture on "Conditions in Iranian Penal Institutions," by Nancy Hormochea, National Lawyers Guild, and Glen Van Slight, Houston Chapter of Human Rights. Sponsored by a Middle Eastern Studies Class, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, May 5, 1977.

9. Iranian demonstration against the admissions policy of Navarro College. Corsicana, Texas, May 27 - June 9, 1977.

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